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Today we're beginning a series connected to stewardship and generosity. And as we begin, I feel like it can be helpful to name that many of us have likely encountered – and maybe even internalized – unhelpful messages about generosity.

If you've spent a lot of time feeling guilty about money and generosity, I hope that you will feel much more encouraged today.

And even more than that, my prayer would be that anything we say, do, or hear during this series will only serve to increase our relationship with God and empower us to be in good relationship with money.

And so to begin, I thought we might offer ourselves a bit of a self-survey to help us get in touch; How we're feeling about money these days? The answers are yours and yours alone. But as you think about it, ask yourself:

On a scale of 1 to 10, how controlled do you feel by your financial circumstances these days?

And to add to that question, also on a scale of 1 to 10, how free do you feel to bless others and pursue your passions?

And then just one more question, on a scale of 1 to 10, when you consider the ways in which you are pursuing your passions, how worried are you that you might have to stop for financial reasons?

With these questions – and our responses to these questions in mind – let's look together at our 2nd Scripture Reading for today: Matthew 6:19-24 (NIV)

“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

“The eye is the lamp of the body. If your eyes are healthy, your whole body will be full of light. But if your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.

Well, as some of you will know, this is a very small excerpt of Jesus' rather lengthy Sermon on the Mount teaching, and it's jam-packed with things that Jesus is wanting the people – and by extension – us to think about.

For one...right away Jesus begins to talk about how hard it is to hold on to stuff in our world. We acquire and accumulate, we scrimp and we save, but one disaster too many, one disaster too great and our lives can suddenly look very different.

Jesus here cites things like “creatures” and “thieves” as possible culprits. But we might also cite illness or injury, natural disaster, job loss, and family size among the many other possibilities for why we might not be able to hold on to what we are trying to store up.

And so Jesus says this rather strange thing. He says, “How about not over-investing yourselves in trying to store up treasures here on Earth?”

And though we’re conditioned to nod our heads that this is a good idea, this turns out to be a spiritual practice that requires some amount of nuance. For example, one of my many roles in ministry over the years has, at times, included offering financial courses. These weren’t curriculums I created myself, but it was interesting to note that, every single time, those curriculums include recommendations that we teach people about having an “emergency fund...” a treasure we have stored up on earth, no?

Now, of course, we don’t call this “storing up our treasures for ourselves.” We call this “good financial planning.” But whatever labels we use for these things, Jesus’ teaching cautions us to be aware that even our best efforts cannot save us from all of the unexpected things that happen in life.

And so Jesus speaks of these realities plainly. He tells us, “This world is unpredictable at times. Your best plans can easily be disrupted. So when you are setting your intentions, keep in mind that “Kingdom Wisdom” is sometimes counter-intuitive to the wisdom of this world.”

And to give you an example of what that can look like in everyday life, I wanted to share with you a really amazing story that my friend shared with me a few years back.

And so, just to share a bit of background – my friend, similar to myself, has worked in the non-profit world for many years. She and her husband have 3 children, live in a major city, and both her and her husband have side jobs in order to make ends meet. But my friend had no ordinary side job. She was functioning as a Personal Chef to a hand surgeon, which I just thought was so interesting. You have to like cooking, of course, in order to be interested in that sort of thing. But I loved hearing about her work.

She had a budget to buy top-quality ingredients. She was also able to cook for her own family at the same time she was cooking for this other person. And bonus, could do phone conferencing for her non-profit job while she was cooking. For the efficient among us, this is the dream.

...all of which made it somewhat devastating when she learned that the surgeon was being relocated to an entirely different state in the next couple of months.

So my friend was coming to me asking for prayer because, as you can imagine, this unexpected turn of events was bringing up a broader set of financial questions. Could they continue doing non-profit work? Did they want to have to continue living in this weird world where they often felt financially blessed but ultimately uncertain about what may lie ahead?

And I can tell you, even as she was asking me for prayer, quite honestly, her prayers were my prayers, too. I very much related to living in that space of uncertainty. And so we prayed.

Fast forward to all of 2 days later, she gets in touch with me to tell me that the relocating surgeon had connected her with other doctors like herself. Now, not only was she a Personal Chef to 1, she was a Personal Chef to 3. So remarkable! A triple blessing had materialized almost overnight, which is so often how it is.

One day, we have no idea what the answer is going to be. We very rarely can see the blessings that are coming ahead of time, hard as we might try. The next day, a door opens up out of nowhere. These are the treasures that come directly from Heaven, as Jesus puts it. Jesus tells us, "You can't count on the things of this world. But you can count on the Kingdom of Heaven."

The question then becomes, how is the eye of our body doing? What is our eye honing in on?

Is it moving us towards Goodness – one of the fruits of the Spirit that we hear about in Galatians, chapter 5? Or is our eye eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil?

This is another one of those discernment questions we can ask ourselves when we're feeling internally conflicted around money. Am I moving towards this fruit of the Spirit that we call Goodness?

Many of us may think of goodness as the act of doing good things. And that is certainly a part of it. But to expand on that a bit, Goodness, as it relates to being a fruit of the Holy Spirit, is something we are led towards.

When we are acting out of the power of the Holy Spirit, we will find ourselves more inclined to act generously – to take on the generous qualities of God. The Greek word for Goodness in Galatians is about a moral quality that is expressed in benevolent action. It's about moving beyond the self, being able to include others, feeling equipped enough to offer kindness and acts of support.

When we're living under the influence of the Fruits of the Spirit – and not the eye of the body – we find that we are more likely to live in generous ways – not because we have to – but because we want to.

...because we're caught up in the Divine Swirl that is the love of God. We feel that love. We receive that love. And we find that it's so unexpectedly abundant, that we actually want to pass it on, to share it and to share in it.

...even though...or maybe in spite of...the fact that we have to make new financial plans every single year. That's just life. And the nature of pursuing our passions – of being love and light in the world – usually means that we are living a life of faith – one year, one month, one week, one day at a time.

It's why we need to regularly take the time to become still and to ask ourselves: What is the treasure that I'm seeking?

What is it that I am seeking from this one wild and precious life that I'm living?

How many of you have heard of the word "dharma?"

There's a book called "The Great Work of Your Life" by Stephen Cope which talks a lot about dharma as it's used in the Bhagavad Gita. Cope tells the reader many times over that Dharma is difficult to define. But if you were to boil it down, he says that you might equate Dharma to "your calling." In other words: What is it that you seem hardwired for? What is that you feel called to do?

And when it comes to your Dharma, Cope says that there will be many things that will try to pull you away...which sounds oddly similar to our reading from Matthew 6 today. Cope says, "You are going to encounter moral dilemmas, the "shoulds" of

society and culture, the stuff.” And in the end, Cope warns the reader that: Not following your calling will ultimately have a negative impact on your life.

We don’t give of our time, energy and money because we have to. We give because our lives call us to it. God’s love, poured out on us and for us, leads us to respond by staying in the swirl by way of our own generous response.

On some days, that looks like happily holding the elevator at the clinic, because when you saw that man pushing that woman in a wheelchair, you completely forgot that you were late for your own appointment. Time didn’t matter because all that mattered was welcoming those two people onto the elevator with you. Come on in. There’s space for you here.

And on other days, it looks like giving to those things that give to you, investing because you’ve been invested in, keeping something alive because the passion and love that come from it compel you to keep it going.

“Where your treasure lies, there your heart will be also.”

This is not a question of what we do and do not have. It’s a question of what feeds our souls.

Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit is going to guide us in living a life that both supplies for our needs AND brings us life. And in order to do that, sometimes it’s helpful to consider how our relationship with money is going.

Are we living afraid? Where does our sense of security, happiness, and peace of mind come from? These are helpful questions both for us personally as well as for us as a congregation – as a group of people living out the Matthew 25 call to do for the least of these as if we were doing those things for Jesus himself.

What are the treasures of the community we live in? In what ways do we participate in those treasures? In what ways are we saying, “Here I am, Lord. Allow me to be your hands and feet. Allow me to be a generous agent of love...not because I have to be that...but because you first loved me. And out of Your love for me, came my desire to share your love with others and invite others into that Divine Swirl.

It’s giving because of our faith and love for God. It’s giving because we want to – because we get to – because we feel the call to – because we see how it will keep goodness going in our church, in our community, and in our world.